

# TAP™ IN FOCUS

## Fact Check:

2017 RESULTS EMPHASIZE  
NIET'S IMPACT OVER TIME



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Sustaining Innovations  
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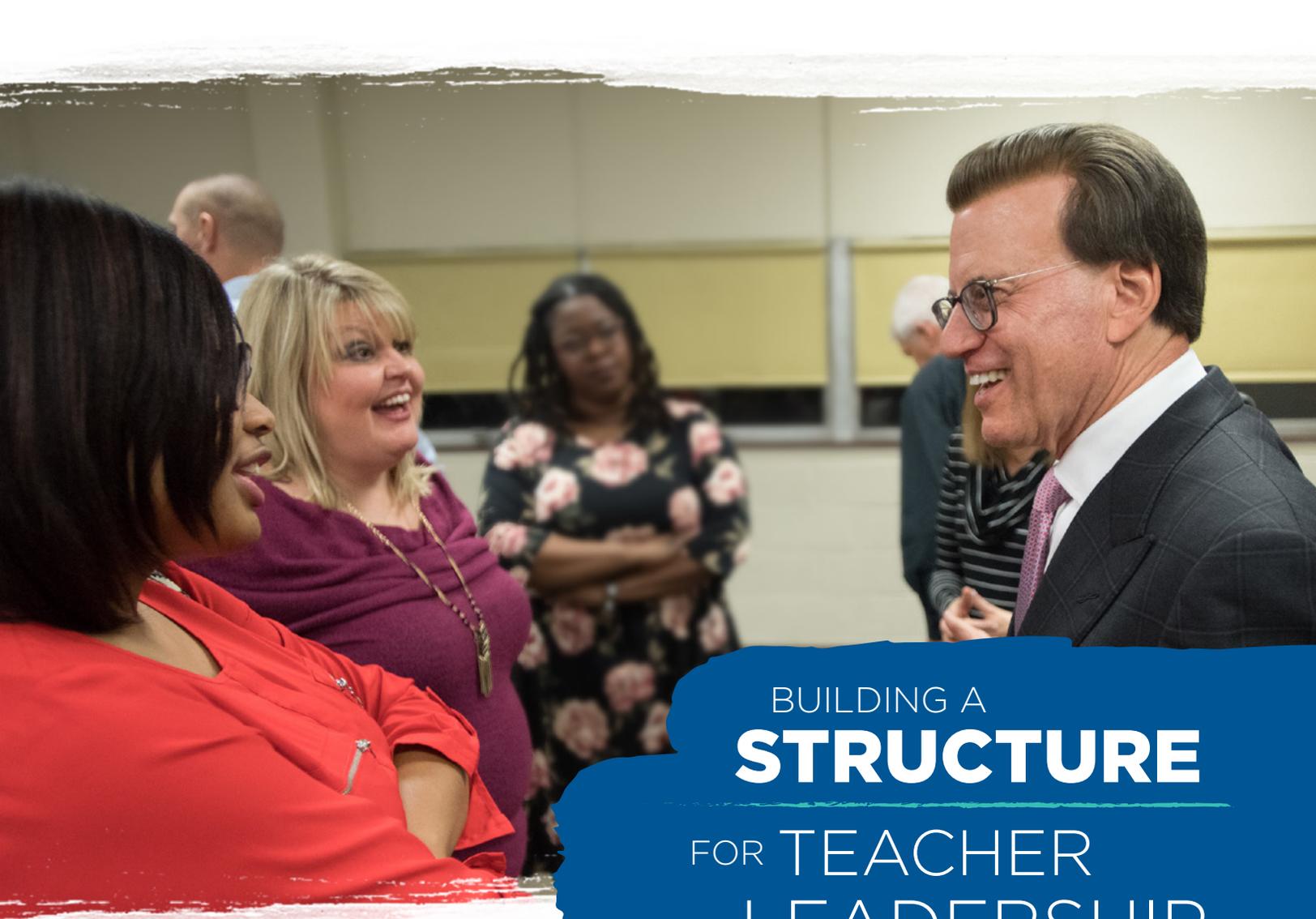
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# BUILDING A **STRUCTURE**

## FOR TEACHER LEADERSHIP

by Lowell Milken

**M**ost people can name at least one teacher who inspired them to succeed. For me, I was most fortunate to have a number of outstanding teachers during my years of schooling who left such an indelible impression that their legacies inform my work daily.

Two of these exceptional teachers were Mr. Fosse and Mr. Sutton whom I remember as warm and caring coaches yet firm and demanding instructors. They challenged me to aim high and become self-reliant. Much later, my work in creating a national program to recognize, celebrate and honor great educators, combined with intensive study of improving teaching practices, has taken me to all corners of the nation. Visiting more than 1,000 classrooms and observing and speaking with educators in every setting

imaginable, has led me to seeking an answer to the very important question: How can we create whole schools of Suttons and Fosses?

While those two individuals were powerful instructional teachers, they were not part of a structure within the school that allowed them to coach others and share best practices across the faculty on an ongoing basis. This shortcoming in the structure of schools could not have

been starker for me than when I visited the classroom of Illinois Milken Educator Catherine Schaller in 1996. I was struck by the fact that students in the next room were receiving a vastly different experience. This need for an ultimate structure that would develop, nurture, retain and motivate teacher leaders led to the early evolution of TAP and the educator effectiveness initiatives of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET). Twenty years later, teacher leadership remains at the core of these initiatives.

**“ The most gratifying result of all is hearing from TAP educators themselves, who are encouraged to excel at higher levels because they now have the structure that supports them every step of the way.**

The term “teacher leader” takes on different meanings across education today. It can be an instructional coach, professional learning liaison or school policy advocate. But in TAP, it’s much more than that. What makes TAP’s teacher leadership system effective is the formalization, authority and increased responsibilities (with commensurate compensation) that come with the master and mentor teacher positions. These expert teacher leaders have the critical roles of driving instruction in the school and working alongside administrators to coach and evaluate other teachers. In addition to their distinguished responsibilities, they are given the time and authority to plan daily job-embedded professional learning, analyze data, field-test strategies, observe other classrooms, co-teach, conduct evaluations, provide detailed feedback to teachers and meet with administrators.

What’s more, the structure allows them to develop a pipeline of effective teachers who can step into leadership roles. The talent drawn from the skills, knowledge and experiences of these educators is thus generative and has the power to sustain instructional excellence and academic growth over the long term.

TAP research shows year after year that this structure is essential to improving teaching and learning. In 2017, 100 percent of administrators surveyed report that the professional growth activities, led by master and mentor teachers, improve instructional practice. Ninety-eight percent report high levels of collegiality, indicative of the teamwork TAP fosters to cultivate talent and leverage best practices across the board.

The most gratifying result of all is hearing from TAP educators themselves, who are encouraged to excel at higher levels because they now have the structure that supports them every step of the way. This finding is prevalent across every educational setting: urban, rural, suburban, private, charter or tribal.

I think of Traci Lust, an executive master teacher at Saydel Community School District in rural Iowa, who has held teacher leadership roles for a decade. Yet after implementing TAP in 2012, she noticed a distinct difference between TAP and previous initiatives. As she describes to me, “With other leadership experiences I’ve had, there wasn’t a clear system. Now we have focus: We have the instructional rubric that clearly describes the kinds of instructional improvements we want to make. Now we are looking at data, individual growth plans, weekly cluster meetings and evaluations. We are ensuring that those structures and processes are running smoothly and are having an impact. As a result, the leadership team is more purposeful.”

Building the structure for teacher leadership has also led to increased student achievement. Saydel experienced the largest growth in ACT scores in the district’s history. The TAP schools served as a pilot for the state Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC) System, which supports leadership opportunities and higher pay for teacher leaders.

In New Orleans, Louisiana, the TAP structure has not only improved teaching and learning within the school walls, but has also helped bring much needed unity to faculty, students and the community at large in Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath.

Brian Young, a former master teacher and now principal of Martin Behrman Charter School of Creative Arts and Sciences, was among the first educators to return to

New Orleans and rebuild his school after the storm. In a poignant essay in *Education Week*, Brian discusses how TAP's teacher leadership model and collaborative professional learning helped pull the school together — resulting in fourth-graders earning a 98 percent proficiency rate in English and a 96 percent proficiency rate in math after the first full year of the initiative.

TAP “gave us a common language of what effective teaching looks like and helped us communicate a clear understanding of where we were and where we needed to be,” Brian states. “During a time of chaos and unpredictability, TAP was our anchor. Having a structure of cohesion and support helped us to focus on what mattered most: the students.”

When a comprehensive and correct structure is put in place that addresses all of the issues of recruitment, professional development, retention and motivation, the environment is in place for everyone to excel. The opportunity to take on leadership roles allows teachers to

broaden their impact. This has been true for TAP Master Teacher Theresa Cross of nearby Alice Harte Charter School, whose staff and students have earned an “A” state rating for four consecutive years.

“Teacher leadership roles are very important in keeping top talent in the profession,” Theresa tells me. “Strong teachers want to have a bigger impact than just the students in their classroom. When a teacher knows that he or she has the option to move into a leadership role, it motivates them to not only stay in the profession, but also to produce amazing results by going the extra mile for their students.”

Indeed. A formalized structure for teacher leadership roles and responsibilities can affect transformational change in districts and schools across our nation. And in the process, provide a viable pathway to instructional excellence and student progress for decades to come. [▶](#)





*Dr. Latatia Johnson (center), then principal of G.W. Carver Primary in Ascension Parish, Louisiana, with her dedicated staff.*

# A PRINCIPAL'S TOOLBOX

Attracting and Retaining Highly Effective Teachers in High-Need Schools

by Dr. Latatia Johnson

**P**rin cipals hold a responsibility paramount to school improvement: putting talented teachers in the front of every classroom. The lack of an effective principal can send a ripple effect through the school, leading to inferior teachers and low-performing students. The longer the cycle continues, the farther behind students lag. This cycle can have devastating effects on families, communities and our nation's democracy.

We know all too well the priorities spinning on principals' plates. While students are busily learning the three R's (reading, writing and 'rithmetic), principals are focused on administration, organization and instruction. Compound these with a discipline issue, an injured student, a disgruntled parent or a visit from the district, and it's no surprise principals lament the limited time during the day to get everything done. Recent studies illuminate a principal's need for adequate time and evidence to assess a teacher's performance accurately. There is no question that we need to heed a principal's call for help.

I am no stranger to the challenges principals face every day. For a decade I led the staff of G.W. Carver Primary, one of the most at-risk schools in Ascension Parish, Louisiana. Eighty-nine percent of our students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and our growing English language learner population meant that we had to double efforts to close language and achievement gaps. Our staff worked hard, but we needed a structure for targeted teacher support, and a mechanism for analyzing data and assessing progress year-round. That's where the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement came in.

TAP is an initiative of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), a group of educators, researchers and policy experts with two decades of experience implementing educator effectiveness reforms across the country.

Ascension Public Schools adopted TAP for its lowest-performing schools, which it called the "Turnaround Zone." Under the TAP System, schools created structures for master and mentor teacher roles and responsibilities, regular job-embedded professional learning, and educator evaluation and performance-based compensation tied to multiple measures of instructional practice and student achievement growth.

**Let's honor principals by giving them the tools they need to prioritize educator effectiveness and put support systems in place to assess performance regularly.**

The district provided another layer of support by visiting schools, providing feedback and leveraging lessons and best practices throughout the district. With this plan, our school soared.

Using financial incentives and ongoing support for teachers as selling points, we were able to fill more than 30 positions with certified educators. What's more, we were able to retain them — at a rate of 91 percent — which still holds true today.

### Through NIET's Steps for Effective Learning, we went through the process of:

- 1 Identifying the school academic need
- 2 Obtaining new teacher learning to accommodate the need
- 3 Developing new teacher learning in collaborative sessions, modeling and team-teaching
- 4 Applying new teacher learning to the classroom
- 5 Evaluating the impact of the teacher learning on student achievement

The experience was eye-opening. Our data analysis showed early on that all third-, fourth- and fifth-graders were reading below grade level. Based on the TAP rubric, we identified essential standards, created criteria for what mastery looked and sounded like for each standard, developed rigorous assessments that met them, and field-tested strategies to make sure that we were on the right track. Mentor teachers implemented the process with masters' support, and provided the critical support to other teachers in the classroom.

We engaged in ongoing dialogue about strengths and areas of improvement — always aligning support to our student learning targets — and adjusted our strategies accordingly. These activities were empowering for the

whole faculty; the more teachers saw evidence of their improved practice, the more enthusiastic they became to continue their trajectories. Student achievement followed.

We increased our third-grade English Language Arts Academic Index and in the upper grades, proficiency soared from 0 to 75 percent-and-above in two years' time. As a result, our School Performance Score — Louisiana's statewide school composite value — grew more than seven points, moving our school's letter grade up from a C- to a B+.

Another proud moment for our teachers was learning that we received a level three value-added growth score on a 1-4 scale, signifying that we exceeded growth targets when compared to similar schools across the state. The comparable data solidified the achievements we accomplished together.

Now I work as an instructional supervisor for Ascension Parish, supporting the district's most at-risk schools.

My tenure at Carver helped me understand how to be strategic and intentional about supporting teachers, and I instill these skills in others.

Creating the structures to make educational improvement happen is not rocket science. Let's honor principals by giving them the tools they need to prioritize educator effectiveness and put support systems in place to assess performance regularly. For only then will every child have the opportunity to succeed in an ever-changing world. 

*Dr. Latatia Johnson is an instructional supervisor at Ascension Public Schools, Louisiana, and served as the principal of G.W. Carver Primary School for 10 years. Under her leadership, Carver received the 2017 TAP Founder's Award, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching's highest honor. Watch this video to learn more about Carver's efforts to dramatically improve teaching and learning:*



[niet.org/newsroom/videos/event/30/75](https://niet.org/newsroom/videos/event/30/75)

*Based on her experience, Johnson was appointed to NIET's educator advisory board for the 2017-18 school year.*





# THE **TEACH** FACTOR

by Dr. Gary Stark

**R**eflect on the feeling when you attained a school goal, improved your school's state rating or hit your stride on a challenging lesson. It's the rush that motivates you to start a new day. How are you going to best prepare your students for bright futures?

**Structured and tiered teacher leadership has not only paved the way for their schools to achieve real progress, but has afforded teachers powerful opportunities to advance in the profession.**

Teachers are in the driver's seat in helping students excel and compete in school and in life. Yet their voices are often missing in major national conversations about equipping young people with the skills to be employable and competitive. We can do better to bridge the gap, and we are.

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) has launched the Teach Factor Campaign to spark dialogue around the principles that affect educator effectiveness and the teaching profession at large. Through shining a light on America's educators, we will form a collective of concrete solutions that will advance and support educators.

Based on our work spanning two decades, we are producing reports, traveling the nation conducting educator focus groups, developing a teacher leadership series and offering planning grants to state agencies — all toward a goal of making educator quality front and center in improving student achievement.

### **UNLEASHING TEACHER LEADERSHIP**

The high levels of support among our NIET network for career pathways in schools inspired our 2018 campaign theme of teacher leadership. To set the stage, NIET has released a report, which provides recommendations for creating formalized roles and responsibilities for school-based teacher leaders. Accomplished educators in our partner locations connect the advice to real-world applications, explaining how structured and tiered teacher leadership has not only paved the way for their schools to

achieve real progress, but has afforded teachers powerful opportunities to advance in the profession without leaving the classroom.

In conjunction with the paper's release and other studies to come, we encourage you take part in this exciting work. Behind every educational success is a teacher who has worked tirelessly and diligently to realize it. So, we ask, what are your essential "teach factors?" What are the strategies that influence your decisions every day? How is your school infrastructure designed to meet the specific needs of your teacher and student populations? How are you analyzing data more effectively than ever before? How has your instruction improved through a research-based rubric of best practices?

Your voices will join a chorus of America's brightest and most experienced teachers, principals and superintendents to inform decision-making. With your help, we can ensure teachers are at the forefront of change in our nation's schools. 

Take action now: [teachfactor.niet.org](https://teachfactor.niet.org)





# UNLEASHING TEACHER LEADERSHIP

## How Formal Teacher Leader Roles Can Improve Instruction and Accelerate Learning

**T**oday's teachers increasingly demand opportunities to take on non-administrative leadership roles that enable them to have a broader impact beyond their own classrooms. And the past decade has seen a growing attention to and investment in teacher leadership among national organizations and state policymakers.

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) has been a pioneer in this work for two decades, having directly trained more than 30,000 new teacher leaders alone. Research has shown, and NIET's experience confirms, that school-based strategies can improve teaching and accelerate learning when they offer teacher participation in structured collaborative learning, job-embedded professional development and coaching, and growth-oriented evaluation that includes more frequent feedback based on classroom observations.

***In school systems supported by NIET, expert teachers take on instructional leadership positions such as the following:***

**MENTOR TEACHER:** Teacher leaders who remain embedded in their own classrooms as “teachers-of-record” for one or more classes of students while also spending several hours per week working with a group of colleagues to improve teaching and learning.

**MASTER TEACHER:** Teacher leaders who are released from all or most regular classroom teaching duties in order to provide instructional leadership for up to 15 of their colleagues.

Policymakers and education system leaders who invest in formal instructional teacher leadership need to carefully consider how to do so in ways that will best sustain teacher leadership and maximize its benefits for instruction and learning. Based on lessons learned, NIET offers the following advice:

**1. Design formal teacher leadership responsibilities to encompass all of the main schoolwide systems for improving instruction.** Formal instructional leadership roles for teachers should be designed to focus on addressing the most pressing need in education — the gap in school-level capacity to systematically and reliably improve teaching and accelerate student learning. To accomplish that, the roles should give teacher leaders significant responsibility for managing and implementing research-proven, high-impact levers for improving instruction: leading collaborative learning teams, conducting formal observations to provide useful feedback to teachers, and ensuring that all teachers benefit from classroom-based coaching.

**2. Leverage teacher leadership to create coherence across major instructional improvement initiatives.** Surveys show that teachers are suffering from “reform fatigue,” not only because of the amount of change they are being asked to accommodate, but also because new initiatives are frequently rolled out to teachers across multiple platforms in disconnected ways. Many of NIET’s school system partners have found that formal instructional teacher leadership roles offer a strategic opportunity to quell the cacophony and create more coherence. Teacher leaders can go first, field-testing new strategies in real classrooms with real students, and they can leverage school-based professional development to help teachers integrate new strategies into their own classroom practice.

**3. Establish multiple, interconnected leadership positions to increase opportunity, reach and impact.** Decision-makers should consider creating multiple, interconnected teacher leadership roles that are sequenced in a career ladder. Among other benefits, such an approach creates more opportunities for expert teachers to take on formal instructional leadership roles. It also expands schoolwide instructional leadership capacity in ways that enable more teachers to benefit from the focused, job-embedded support teacher leaders provide.

**4. Emphasize that formal instructional teacher leadership roles enhance, rather than limit, opportunities for all staff to engage in leadership.** Research and experience have shown that leadership is not a zero-sum quantity in schools, and formal instructional teacher leadership positions enhance, rather than limit, opportunities for administrators and for all other teachers to engage in leadership. However, because of misconceptions about formal teacher leadership roles, policymakers and system leaders need to communicate this up front.

**5. Select teacher leaders who have the right set of accomplishments, skills and dispositions to succeed.** Formal instructional teacher leadership roles are not honorifics bestowed on more senior teachers with long experience in a particular district or school. They are highly demanding positions that require exceptional levels of expertise and a deep commitment to the unique nature of “hybrid” leadership. It is important that such leaders be competitively selected from a robust candidate pool based on explicit job-related criteria.

**6. Provide teacher leaders with training and ongoing support focused on specific job responsibilities.** Teachers who take on formal instructional leadership roles require specialized training and ongoing support to fulfill new responsibilities they will not have encountered before. The most effective training and support will be targeted to specific responsibilities of the role — whether leading collaborative teams or conducting formal observations to provide instructional feedback.

**7. Empower teacher leaders by adopting common tools and protocols, including a research-based instructional framework or rubric.** Far from stifling creativity or stymieing initiative, such tools provide teacher leaders with critical scaffolding for doing their jobs well, and they relieve new teacher leaders from having to “reinvent the wheel.”

**8. Create and protect release time during the week for teacher leaders to lead, and give them enough time to build trust and long-term relationships that enable success.** Teacher leaders need sufficient, predictable and dedicated release time to fulfill their specific job responsibilities every day and every week. Moreover, it takes time for teacher leaders to develop the relationships, trust and credibility necessary to realize maximum impact on classroom practices and student learning.

**9. Make more strategic use of existing resources to fund formal teacher leadership positions.** NIET's partner districts have found they can pay for formal teacher leadership positions, even when dedicated state or federal funds are not available, if they can make more strategic use of their existing resources. First, district leaders can repurpose spending on budget items that are not producing measurable improvements in instruction and student learning. Second, they can use school-based teacher leadership positions to "in-source" professional development, repurposing

funds that previously had been spent on expensive outside providers in order to deliver more relevant job-embedded learning for all teachers.

**10. Place teacher leaders at the school level, but expect districts to play a key role in sustaining and leveraging teacher leadership for maximum impact.** Formal instructional teacher leadership positions are best embedded at the school level, enabling teacher leaders to build and capitalize on deep relationships with the teachers they lead and support. However, districts play a critical role in establishing, sustaining and leveraging formal teacher leadership to achieve maximum impact. District-level leadership is especially crucial when it comes to recruitment and hiring of teacher leaders, providing ongoing support for teacher leaders, funding and sustaining teacher leadership positions, and leveraging teacher leadership to create coherence across districtwide improvement initiatives. **D**

To learn more, visit:

**[teachfactor.niet.org](http://teachfactor.niet.org)**





# SUSTAINING INNOVATIONS THAT HAVE **IMPACT**

**W**ith the passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, one of the most anticipated changes was the federal government handing the baton back to states to lead K-12 policy reform. While federal requirements for testing remain, states as “laboratories of democracy” are empowered to design interventions to support school improvement.

One big obstacle to their success, however, has been the challenge of innovating at the state and district levels where a range of constraints limits attempts to try something different. That is why the experience of districts and states in the federal Teacher and School Leader Incentive Fund (TSL) and the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants is instructive. The work in these districts provides a range of evidence-based examples of how to strengthen classroom practices that are highly relevant for other districts and states.

Competitive grants require applicants to think comprehensively about reform and to logically align their systems of educator support or “human capital management” with their academic and school goals. What is innovative about this? It pushes districts to explicitly align a range of previously disconnected processes for recruitment, hiring, professional learning, evaluation, career advancement, leadership opportunities and compensation. The grants support districts to create a long-term vision, outline the key steps necessary to get there, and

integrate more effective practices into existing systems. By breaking the cycle of layering new requirements on top of old without a unifying vision, districts — many for the first time — now have in place a vision and language for improvement that underlie budgets, programs and culture.

Partnering with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) and implementing the TAP System created a system of teacher and school leader improvement and growth across each district. The systems put in place through TAP support the district’s ability to be innovative in response to new challenges and to identify and sustain those practices that lead to improvement. Below are some of the challenges these high-need districts continue to face, and what mechanisms they have instituted to overcome them.

### RECRUITING AND HIRING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

Somerset Independent School District (SISD), located outside San Antonio, Texas, serves a high-need student population with a large number of English language learners. By implementing the TAP System, SISD created systems of support in each of its high-need schools using a cadre of teacher leaders working with school leaders to deliver high-quality school-based professional learning, and individualized classroom coaching. Through the use of research-based teaching standards that provide a common language for instructional improvement, Somerset’s teaching staff has extensive support to deliver

a rigorous and challenging curriculum. Performance-based compensation pioneered under the federal grant has evolved to serve the unique needs of the district, and provides an important tool in recruiting effective teachers.

These improvements led to dramatic gains in student academic achievement, particularly for students with the greatest learning gaps, including English language learners. The high school graduation rate increased to 94 percent in 2017.

Yet to hire effective teachers — especially those in traditionally hard-to-staff positions like bilingual or special education — the district continued to struggle to compete against 16 better funded adjacent districts. SISD thus responded by working with NIET to grow its own teachers. Through a partnership with Texas Tech University (TTU), the district created a “grow your own” program with community colleges in the Somerset area to identify and develop local teachers. Students with an associate’s degree can participate in the 12-calendar month-long program to earn their teacher certification through TTU. TTU offers support via an on-site coordinator, and teacher candidates are embedded in schools where they participate in observations and learn the TAP System. Their coursework is delivered by TTU at the school site. There were 14 candidates in the first cohort, and all but one were hired by SISD. There are 21 in the 2017 cohort. SISD benefits by developing local teachers who have ties to the community. As such, most

### Somerset ISD’s High-Need Students Increase Achievement

Percent of Third-Grade Students Scoring Level II Satisfactory or Above on STAAR Texas State Assessment

2016  
2017



**“ The leadership team identifies and develops teachers along the career path. We can then draw from within our own staff when a leadership opportunity arises. Part of the culture has to be trust, and the career path enables districts to build that culture of trust.**

**DR. SAUL HINOJOSA**

*Superintendent*

*Somerset Independent School District*

are bilingual and representative of the diverse student population. An added bonus is that district staff knows the quality of each teacher candidate before hiring and how he or she would fit into the desired school's culture.

Somerset ISD Superintendent Dr. Saul Hinojosa adds that, “The leadership team identifies and develops teachers along the career path. We can then draw from within our own staff when a leadership opportunity arises. Part of the culture has to be trust, and the career path enables districts to build that culture of trust.”

Cross County Community School District, located in northeastern Arkansas, also uses the structures and procedures of the TAP System to strengthen teacher development and support. Despite improvements in both teacher effectiveness and student learning, the district continues to have difficulty recruiting teachers due to its rural location. Because local colleges are not producing enough teacher candidates, Cross County partnered with Arkansas Tech University, located about three hours from the district. The partnership supports teacher candidates with a stipend during their internship, and offers them a potential position upon graduation with a higher starting salary than a traditional first-year teacher. These additional recruitment strategies have been successful in attracting a larger number of new applicants, while the structures for teacher growth and career advancement already in place through TAP have supported the hiring and retention of new teachers.

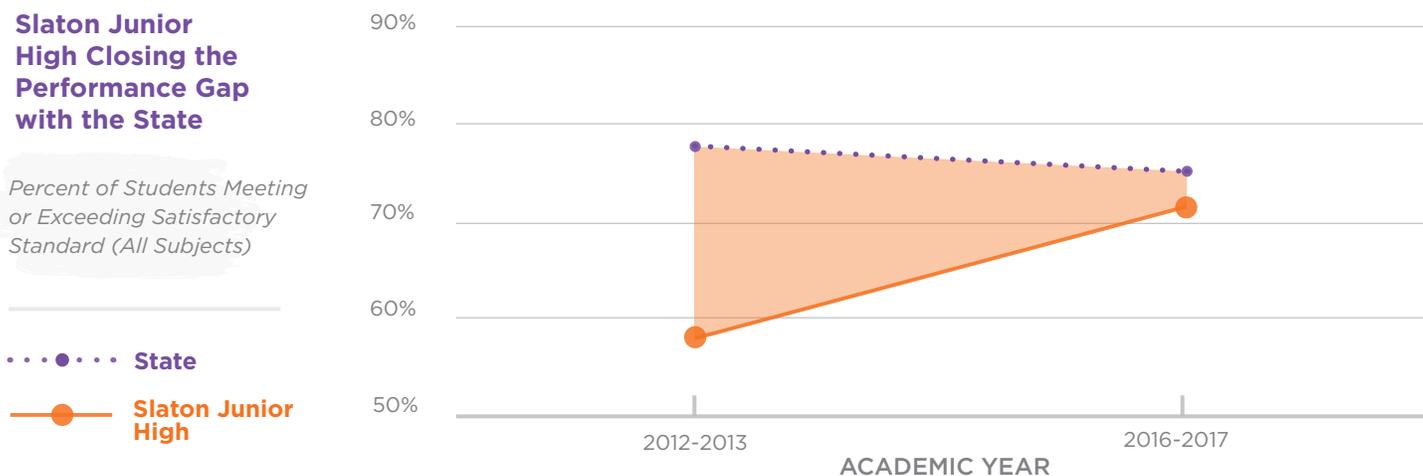


## ENSURING THAT EVERY STUDENT HAS EQUITABLE ACCESS TO EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

The need to improve educational outcomes for high-need students has been a driving factor in efforts to innovate by NIET’s partners in Texas’ Slaton Independent School District. The district is using the TAP System to close achievement gaps between its high-need student populations and the state average. Slaton ISD’s progress from 2012 to 2017 is reflected in the achievements of Slaton Junior High School as illustrated below. These results gained the attention of state policymakers.

### Slaton Junior High Closing the Performance Gap with the State

*Percent of Students Meeting or Exceeding Satisfactory Standard (All Subjects)*



For example, the Texas Equity Plan, part of the state’s implementation of ESSA, includes a range of interventions that directly align to the steps taken by Texas districts partnering with NIET to support equitable access to effective teaching in high-need schools. These interventions include the development of teacher leadership roles, building the capacity to deliver professional learning in-house, combining observation with detailed, timely feedback that produces measurable improvements in classroom practice, and using leadership opportunities and strategic compensation to support placement and retention.

Even with the strong gains made using the TAP System and educator effectiveness best practices, it is an ongoing challenge to ensure that the most effective teachers and principals are reaching the students that need them the most. It is still too often the case that the highest-need schools and classrooms have fewer experienced teachers and higher turnover rates. Using the experience gained from introducing performance into compensation systems with the support of a Teacher Incentive Fund grant, the districts are using strategic compensation to recruit more effective teachers. The compensation systems are also

supporting principals in recruiting teachers through career fairs targeting effective teachers with incentives such as signing bonuses, along with funds to support training and placement of school leaders in high-need schools.

In addition, NIET’s partner districts are developing school leaders through a principal mentor program in partnership with NIET and Texas Tech University. The principal fellows program addresses deficiencies in traditional principal preparation — particularly the lack of training for aspiring principals to supporting teachers in improving their instructional skills. The fellowship enables incoming principals to learn how to create distributed leadership

teams and empower teacher leaders as a core strategy for strengthening classroom instructional practices. (Read more about the principal fellows program on page 20.)

## DEFINING AND BUILDING THE CORE SKILLS NEEDED BY TEACHER LEADERS

As districts embed new teacher leader roles, they can expect to face challenges in scaling up these practices over time. For example, defining the leadership roles and expectations for principals, master and mentor teachers in ways that are consistent across the district is essential to success. Schools often begin to evolve these roles in different fashions, which creates confusion at the district level. As districts take on a greater role in developing and growing their own leaders, they find an increasing need to create and communicate clear, consistent expectations for teacher leader positions across schools.

Hinojosa found that some of his mentor teachers, in particular, needed additional training and support in leadership skills to fulfill the accountability side of their role. The district thus committed additional resources to

build the capacity of mentors toward providing feedback and holding teachers accountable for expectations.

Farther west, Dr. Betsy Hargrove, superintendent of Avondale Elementary School District #44 in Phoenix, Arizona, also found the mentor teacher role particularly important to get right. She comments on the importance of developing the skills of mentor teachers and clearly defining their responsibilities within a school: “The mentor teacher role is challenging since you have to designate enough time for effective coaching and classroom support, and decide how to prioritize this time.”

Over time, educators in TAP schools come to better understand the specific job requirements, expectations, challenges and benefits of the role, and to engage in defining these roles in their own school and district. Other teachers see the time, effort and difficult work that master and mentor teacher roles require. Master Teacher Liz Martin in Goshen, Indiana, explains, “It is important to articulate and share with potential new teacher leaders the work they will be doing, but also the impact they can have as part of the leadership team.” It is particularly important to build on the strength of the mentor teachers, Martin says. Due to their frequent interactions with teachers and students and their leadership roles, mentors are able to share what is needed to move student achievement. They have a voice now in decision-making, and are using it.

## STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF THE DISTRICT IN SUSTAINING IMPROVEMENT

In Perry Township, located in Indianapolis, Indiana, Assistant Superintendent Vickie Carpenter describes how her district uses the TAP Rubric as a lens for all other

programs and initiatives. “The district’s goal is for teachers to know they are being supported instead of being given another program or strategy to figure out,” she says. “We emphasize the importance of using evidence.”

Carpenter explains that the practices and activities articulated in the TAP System serve as a metric for Perry Township Schools to avoid competing “add-on” programs and ensure that any new initiatives integrated into the school are aligned with existing work. For example, a district was able to seamlessly integrate an initiative to target Perry’s large ELL population into the existing work being done by teacher leaders.

Perry Township also provides an example of how both fiscal and programmatic changes must be made to sustain successful practices. From the beginning, districts such as Perry committed local dollars to implement TAP, making long-term sustainability a district priority. They also allocated Title I and Title II funds, particularly to support teacher leader roles. In Carpenter’s view, “Sustainability has been possible due to the district’s allocation of general fund and other dollars to support continued implementation of TAP structures.”

Over time, NIET partner districts find that the systems they put in place through TAP enable them to respond more effectively to new challenges as they arise, further strengthening their commitment.

As states take a leading role in defining how to meet challenging academic achievement targets in the ESSA era, the experiences of these districts illustrate how to balance a commitment to innovation with an ability to identify and sustain the most impactful new practices. 





# LIFTING UP HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS

THROUGH **HIGHER ED PARTNERSHIPS**

A typical training program for principals involves a lot of coursework and very little time spent working in a classroom. In 2015, Texas Tech University (TTU) incepted a program that flips that formula on its head.

Working with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), TTU drives the Leadership Instruction for Teachers (LIFT) program, which is focused on job-embedded, on-site training in addition to learning the theoretical framework for effective instruction. And the principal fellows' training in theory is based on data and problem sets from the districts in which they are on the ground.

The LIFT program is an example of NIET's ongoing work with Institutions of Higher Education and their district partners to create a common language and understanding of what effective instruction and school leadership look like, promote feedback to teacher and principal candidates through a research-based rubric, and strengthen these partnerships so that district schools that need it most will have access to the highest-quality educators.

The goal of the intensive, fast-track training program is two-fold: to strengthen the partnerships between higher education institutions and surrounding partner school districts and to create a pipeline of talent into the communities through a “Grow Your Own” model for instructional training.

The training for principal fellow candidates is embedded at the university level, so they are taking courses at TTU and in their district from TTU site coordinators about how to effectively lead a school and teach other instructors and teacher leaders. As TTU strengthens its connections with surrounding school districts, such as Grand Prairie Independent School District (GPISD), the training the fellows receive at the university level is preparing them for the real-world scenarios in those districts. As Principal Fellow Corey Atkins of S.F. Austin Elementary School sees it, “We principal fellows are full-time graduate students even as we are full-time employees.”

The university-level instruction is tailored to make the whole experience of learning how to be a principal more authentic. The fellows are introduced to theory through book work, but then they have to put that theory into practice. The assignments from TTU are not vague, in relating to “some school in the United States,” but are specific to the school in which a fellow is working. The data sets they are working with are from the schools so every piece of work is authentic.

Atkins, whose studies at TTU have focused on the thesis that public education is a potential means of social justice, explains exactly how the theory and practice have intertwined during his time in the program: “In post-conferences and professional learning communities

(PLCs) with teachers, for example, I reflexively think about recent coursework incorporating the tenets of effective feedback. And when I meet with my classmates and professors during our learning sessions, as we discuss research-verified strategies for offering feedback, I reflexively think about specific teachers whom I see every day. My clinical experience helps me to contextualize my study of theory, and my study of theory helps me to interpret my clinical experience.”

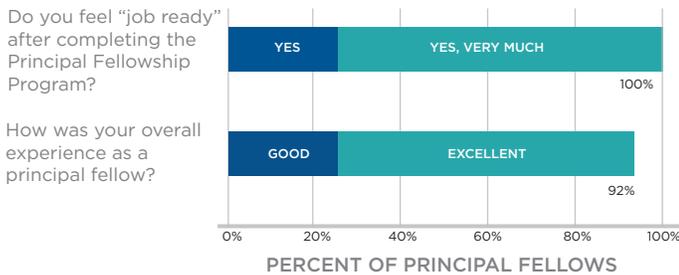
The familiarity with the on-the-ground situations better prepares the fellows to be effective from day one after their training is over. “The teacher candidates we’re getting though the [LIFT program] — there’s a level of maturity, there’s a level of confidence, and there’s a level of being understanding [of] what instruction is,” says Pat Lewis, associate superintendent of Grand Prairie ISD. “They understand the importance of forming relationships. They come in knowing how to plan our lessons.”

Lewis emphasizes the importance of this sort of clinical training in education. “In the medical and legal fields, they have to have some kind of clinical, practical experience before they’re really ready to do the job. So we look at it in that same way,” she says. “We look at it as providing our teacher candidates that practical experience so they will know what to expect when they get in the classroom.”

TTU Site Coordinator at GPISD Shannon Watson says that the experience the fellows receive in the classrooms “reduces their learning curve once hired as the teacher [or administrator] of record, allowing them to focus on students.”

In 2017 a survey was administered towards the end of the yearlong experience to gauge principal fellows' perceptions of the LIFT program. When asked about their overall LIFT program experience, 92 percent reported their experience as "Good" or "Excellent." Similarly, when asked whether they feel "job-ready," 100 percent voted "Yes" or "Yes, very much."

### Principal Fellows Report Positive Perceptions of the LIFT Program



### HOW LIFT WORKS TO ELEVATE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Principal fellows who enter the program are paired with a mentor principal to shadow and learn from as they go about their daily routines. In Grand Prairie ISD, there is a significant focus on matching and training the mentors. The district is very intentional about the prep program, in that they work to find the right mentor matches for the fellows. They examine each fellow and mentor's strengths and areas for growth as they move through the program to decide whom to pair with each other. The mentor then coaches the fellow, co-plans instructional growth lessons, and co-teaches other instructors in the school.

The program itself focuses on preparing the fellows to teach other school leaders. "I was able to learn how to be very specific with what I need other adults to do," says Amanda Rodriguez, a former principal fellow and current assistant principal at Lorenzo De Zavala Environmental Science Academy, a GPISD school. "So I know what I wanted. You know what you need to do to add value to students' lives. You know you want to increase student achievement. TAP has given me the specific tools to get other adults to be able to do that."

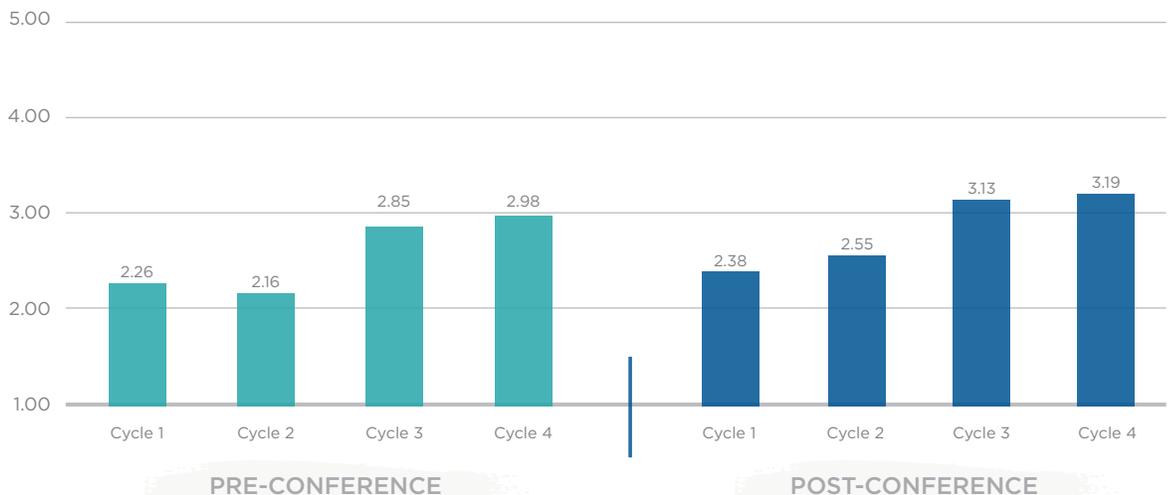
The program is teaching her how to not just tell the teachers the right way to do something, but also to make sure the teachers understand why one strategy works and another might not. "The principal fellows program has grown my leadership skills. I am now able to go right to a teacher's classroom, sit, observe, watch the interaction of that adult with those students, and not just say, 'Well, you know, I wouldn't have done it that way. This is how you should do it,'" says Rodriguez. "Now I'm able to coach that teacher into her understanding where she's at, where her students are at, and what she needs to do to grow them and get them to where they need to be to add value."

She stresses that the LIFT program has taught her how to allow teachers and teacher leaders to draw conclusions for themselves. "Allowing them to come to that conclusion on their own" helps earn buy-in from the other teachers, she says.

Throughout the program, TTU faculty and staff assessed principal fellows' coaching skills by evaluating their ability to facilitate discussions before and after the observations

### Principal Fellows Improve Coaching Skills

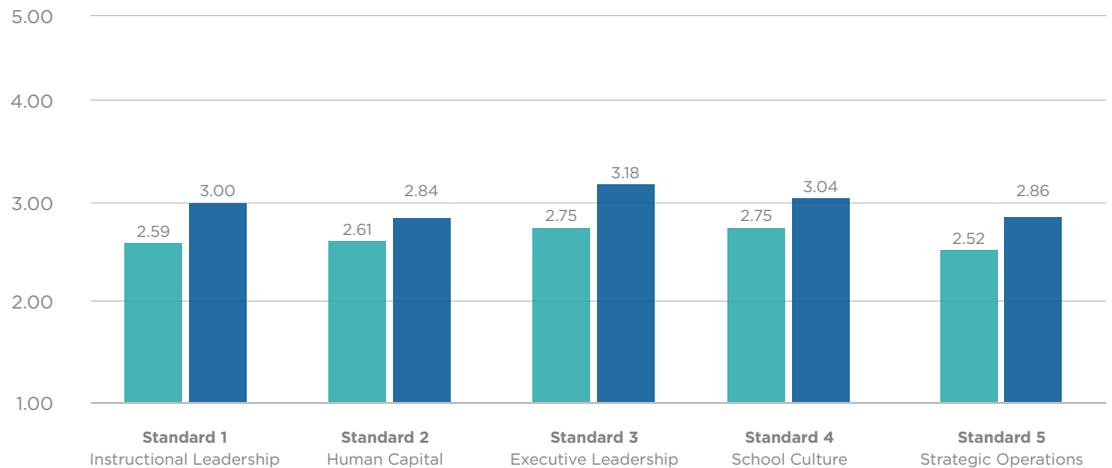
Average Conference Facilitation Rubric Score



## Growth in Principal Fellows' Leadership Skills

Average T-PESS Score

Midyear  
End-of-year



of teachers (i.e., pre- and post-conferences). NIET findings show that on average, principal fellows demonstrate improvement in their coaching skills at pre- and post-conferences. Moreover, dependent sample  $t$  tests suggest that principal fellows' improvement in coaching skills from Cycle 1 to Cycle 4 were statistically significant ( $t(10) = 4.91, p < .001$  for pre-conference and  $t(10) = 4.66, p < .001$  for post-conference).

In addition to improved coaching skills, the principal fellows' leadership skills are also seen to be improved through their participation in the LIFT program. Principal mentors evaluated principal fellows' leadership skills using the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS). NIET research indicates, on average, principal fellows showed improvement in each T-PESS standard from midyear to end-of-year evaluations. Moreover, changes in three T-PESS standards were statistically significant: Instructional Leadership ( $t(10) = 2.78, p < .01$ ), Executive Leadership ( $t(10) = 2.43, p < .05$ ), and Strategic Operations ( $t(10) = 2.22, p < .05$ ).

### GROWING TALENT IN HIGH-NEED COMMUNITIES

In addition to the focus on instructional leadership training through the TTU partnership, there is also a focus on growing teacher and principal candidates from inside high-need school districts and communities. They recruit fellows who are local and have finished two-year associate degrees. For Atkins, GPISD is his home district, and working in the district, he strives to be a positive role model, particularly for students of color, by becoming as effective of an instructor as he can be through his training in the LIFT program.

By growing talent out of high-need areas, the program is addressing the pipeline need on all cylinders; filling gaps in areas where teacher shortages are often an issue, and making those educators as effective as they can be in areas where teacher effectiveness is a major shortcoming. A by-product of this equation is that students get to work with teachers from similar backgrounds as their own, and learn that they, too, can pave pathways to success.

While Atkins was working with a set of students to prepare them for the Eighth-Grade Science TAKS exam, one student asked him, "Why do you tuck your shirt in and wear a belt even on Saturdays?" Though the question seemed out-of-left-field, questions like this and scores of similar ones he had encountered over the years brought him to the realization that his students were watching, even studying him. He felt that his "comportment was [often] more compelling than the subject that I worked to help [the students] learn."

When several students remarked to Atkins that they had never seen an African-American male instructor outside of P.E. classes, he understood how much it meant for him to be working in GPISD helping to lead the school.

Atkins says, "If I can become the effective administrator that I intend to be, maybe some students who look *like* me will look *at* me and think that it might not be so bad to wear a belt and a tucked-in shirt and to lead a school." 

# 2017 RESULTS EMPHASIZE NIET'S IMPACT OVER TIME

Single accomplishments can be tremendously satisfying: an increase in a school performance score, measured growth in an area of instruction, or hitting a benchmark toward a school goal. Even more powerful is when each contributes to a continuum of improvement year after year. NIET's 2017 research shows gains in student achievement, strongly positive attitudes from teachers and administrators, and most importantly, the magnitude of these impacts on NIET's partner locations over time.

NIET shared some of these latest findings at the 2017 American Educational Research Association (AERA) national conference, the world's largest gathering of scholars in the education research field. The four presented studies were:

#### **The Front Lines:**

Administrators Discuss Implementing a New Educator Effectiveness System

#### **5,000 Strong:**

Teacher's Responses to a New Educator Effectiveness and Support System

#### **Promising Pathways:**

How Enhanced Educator Preparation Programs Improve Teacher Quality

#### **Stayers, Movers, and**

**Leavers:** Impact of an Educator Effectiveness System on Retaining Administrators Nationwide

What follows are highlights from additional research papers regarding NIET's impact on student achievement and teacher and administrator perceptions of the TAP System.

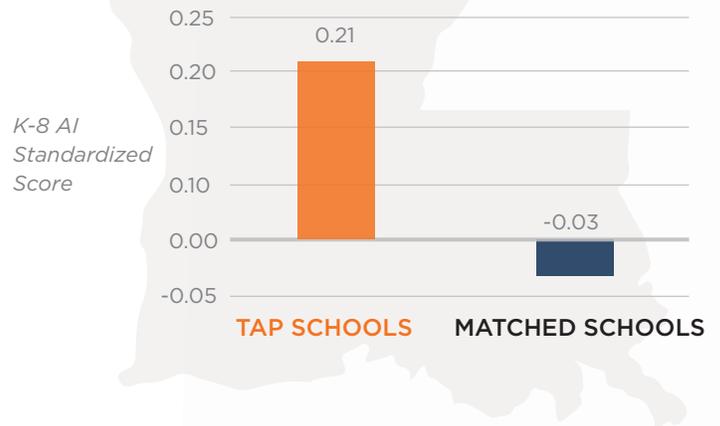
# Student Achievement Spotlights

## LOUISIANA

Building on an NIET study from 2014 finding a significant positive effect of TAP on 2012-13 K-8 Assessment Index scores when compared with similar control schools, NIET conducted a follow-up study in 2017.

In the examination of 49 K-8 TAP schools, averaging an 87.6 percent free and reduced-price lunch rate at the start of TAP implementation, they significantly outperformed their matched comparison schools in student performance growth ( $t(48) = 2.11, p = 0.04$ ) from base year to 2015-16. While, on average, Louisiana TAP schools improved by 0.21 standard deviations in student performance from one year prior to TAP System implementation to 2015-16, student performance in matched schools declined 0.03 over this time.

Student Performance Growth in Louisiana TAP and Matched Comparison Schools



## SLATON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS

In 2014, Slaton Independent School District (ISD) began implementing the TAP System districtwide with the support of a U.S. Department of Education Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED-1) grant, in partnership with Texas Tech University (TTU) and NIET. In addition to the implementation of the TAP System, the three-way partnership among NIET, TTU and Slaton ISD included providing all teachers at Slaton Junior High with coursework in STEM, Literacy, and Leadership delivered by TTU faculty. Coursework in these areas was designed to closely align with the expectations within the TAP System.

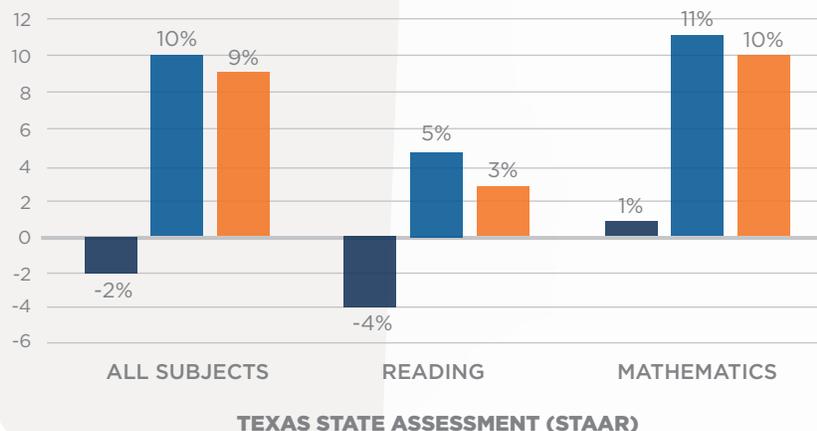
To examine the impact of the TAP System implementation and the advanced coursework offered at Slaton Junior High, school performance data from the year prior to TAP System implementation through the 2016-17 school year were tracked.

The study found that from 2013-14 to 2016-17, the percentage of students at “Approaches Grade Level or Above” in all subjects combined and in reading declined statewide but increased at Slaton Junior High. Additionally, while both the state and Slaton Junior High experienced increases in the percentage of students at “Approaches Grade Level or Above” in math from 2013-14 to 2016-17, Slaton Junior High’s academic growth exceeded that of students statewide.

Student Performance Growth Statewide and at Slaton Junior High

Growth in the Percentage of Students at Approaches Grade Level or Above, 2013-14 to 2016-17

- State
- All Students Slaton Junior High
- Economically Disadvantaged Students Slaton Junior High



# Teacher and Administrator Attitudes

Teacher Reported Support for Collegiality in 2017

## COLLEGIALITY

Contrary to the concern that performance measures and incentives for teachers will result in competitiveness and loss of collegiality among teachers, NIET finds high levels of collegiality year after year in TAP schools due to the collaboration and supportive cultures the model fosters. In the 2017 TAP Teacher Attitude Survey, 94 percent of teachers in TAP schools agree with statements reporting a high level of collegiality in their schools, and over 73 percent report strong agreement.



As one teacher shared:

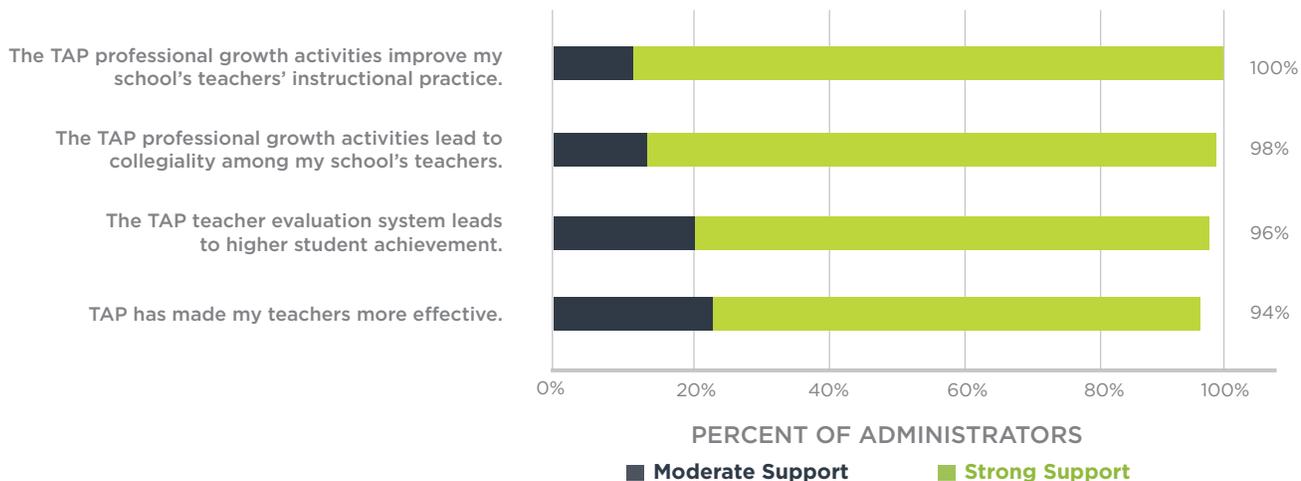
“ TAP has brought about major changes in the **collaboration among teachers**. Before TAP, teachers rarely talked to each other about what was going on in their classrooms. Now, it happens frequently.



## ADMINISTRATOR RESULTS

According to the 2017 TAP Administrator Attitude Survey, principals overwhelmingly report that TAP has a positive effect on instructional practices, collegiality, student achievement, and teacher effectiveness.

### Administrator Results on TAP Outcomes in their Schools



These practices have led to increased teacher retention. Ninety-eight percent of principals surveyed agree that TAP helps retain effective teachers.

NIET's consistently positive results spanning two decades would not be achievable without an evaluation system capable of differentiating teacher performance levels and providing detailed feedback for improvement, ongoing professional growth in classroom practice using student and teacher data to guide improvement, recruitment and retention of effective teachers, and the creation of a challenging, rewarding and collegial environment focused on high-quality instruction and student learning. 

For more information on NIET's research, visit:

[niet.org/our-impact/research](http://niet.org/our-impact/research)

### Administrators Agree: "The Implementation of TAP Has Helped Retain Effective Teachers at My School"



# TAP™ IN FOCUS

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